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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000137

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV, EB, AND OES  
BANGKOK FOR FAS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAGR](#) [TBIO](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU: BURMA TIGHTENS DEFENSES TO REPEL NEW  
THAI INVADER

1. (SBU) Summary: There appears to be no avian influenza yet in Burma and the government has taken the initiative to keep it that way. An interagency committee has begun a broad prevention program, which includes cutting off imports of baby chicks from Thailand. Though we are relatively confident in the GOB's assessment thus far, it will be very difficult to know when and if the "bird flu" makes the jump into Burma. End summary.

#### Battening Down the Hatcheries

2. (SBU) In response to outbreaks of "bird flu" elsewhere in Asia, the Burmese government first took steps on January 20 to address the prospects of the disease moving into Burma's chicken population. The joint Ministry of Health/Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries "Work Committee for Prevention and Treatment of Avian Influenza" determined that there was no flu in Burma (a notion later seconded informally to the Chief of Mission by the local WHO rep) but that preventive measures should be initiated immediately to educate the people and strengthen controls on imported chickens.

3. (SBU) This latter measure became more urgent after January 23, when neighboring Thailand, the source of millions of Burma's imported chicks, finally admitted its flocks were harboring several cases of the disease. On January 24, the Committee announced a moratorium on the import of any poultry products without a health certificate verified by the Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries. The Committee also announced it would order local SPDC cadres and health and livestock officials to increase inspections across the country of local poultry farms -- especially those in the 14 townships along the Thai border. Finally, the Committee launched an aggressive education campaign in local media aimed at both farmers and consumers. The GOB has not yet ordered any culling of Burma's chicken flocks, though there are rumors that the Committee has pre-emptively ordered the quarantine of chicken farm workers along the Thai border. This has not been verified, though.

#### Chicken Farming a Booming Business

4. (SBU) The GOB's vigilance is wise considering the huge number of domestic and imported chickens raised and sold across the country. According to a Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries official, last year there were 62 million chickens raised in Burma. Burmese farmers -- including at government and military-owned farms -- have been raising increasing numbers of chickens in response to a government campaign to produce more "Myanmar meat and fish" to feed booming urban populations and the supposedly increasing number of foreign tourists. For the latter audience local chicken farmers have been importing more and more Thai chicks (known as "CP chickens," taking the name a large Thai agribusiness concern) in recent years -- 12 million in 2003. Native Burmese chickens are what we would affectionately call "free range;" quite tough and scrawny, laying small and often fertilized eggs. The CP chickens, farm-raised, tend to be larger, of better health, and produce more, larger, and unfertilized eggs.

5. (SBU) A local chicken farmer with whom we spoke said that he knew of no outbreaks of the avian flu. However, he said somewhat superstitiously that fellow Rangoon-area poultry farmers had been complaining about a reduction in egg production in the latter half of January. He also mentioned the sudden deaths of 30,000 chickens along the southern Burma-Thai border in mid-January, but thought it was due to colder than normal weather in that region.

Comment: Is it Really Safe?

6. (SBU) As during the SARS scare of 2003, it will be difficult to know for sure whether Burma remains avian flu free. The government has made its claims, but it is not at all clear that the GOB would make an announcement if it found evidence of the flu -- instead possibly dealing quietly with the suspected cases and maintaining the "flu free" posture. Even with best intentions the GOB will have little luck controlling the lengthy and porous Thai border if someone is

intent on importing potentially infected Thai chickens. The plummeting local price of chicken meat and eggs, though, makes it economically illogical for a Burmese farmer to do so. End comment.  
Martinez